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ABSTRACT

This report, third of eight in a series, highlights the views of California adults about investing in young people for their healthy development. Because adult guidance is so critical to promoting health development of young people, as part of the California Center for Health Improvement's Children and Youth survey, California adults were asked if they were concerned about the level of parental support children and youth in their community received. Responses were received from 1,168 adults, 498 of whom were parents of children under the age of 18 and 884 of whom were registered voters. Seventy-eight percent of adults surveyed said that they are either very worried or somewhat worried about a lack of parental support for young people. More than half of parents were very worried. Forty-nine percent of those surveyed believed that most children these days need more attention and guidance from adults. Research does indicate that young people today have a lot of free time, and research also shows that a sense of connection between young people and adults helps protect them from risks that can affect their health. Strategies to promote healthy young people are discussed. These use an assets-based approach that recognizes the strengths young people have as assets to be reinforced. School and community partnerships are an important part of such an approach. Mentoring is another community-based approach that can bring young people and adults together. Research has made the link between low educational attainment and many conditions that undermine the health of children. When California adults were asked if they would pay more in taxes for education support programs for young people, such as tutoring or reading programs, 77% of registered voters said they were somewhat or very willing to pay more in taxes to support these services. Survey respondents also thought that establishing more programs for school age children would help make communities safer for children. Policy recommendations are made for partnerships for youth development, a focus on the assets all young people have, and the investment of additional resources in programs for young people. (Contains two tables and eight references.) (SLD)

ED 426 122

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Growing Up Well
Focus on Prevention

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Worried About Guidance for Young People

Californians Favor Investing in After-School, Mentoring, Education Programs

Young people face many challenges on their paths to adulthood. The pressures of school, the desire to fit in with peers, the easy availability of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs, and the biological changes of puberty are just a few. Researchers have found that the most critical variable for promoting healthy development of a child through childhood and adolescence is the presence of a caring and supportive adult (1, page 6).

Because adult guidance is so critical to promoting healthy development of young people, as a part of the California Center for Health Improvement's (CCHI) *Children and Youth Survey*, California adults were asked if they are concerned about the level of parental support children and youth in their community receive. The survey was conducted by The Field Institute in English and Spanish, and the sample of 1,168 California adults included 498 parents with children under the age of 18, and 884 registered voters (2).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Young people need adult guidance in order to develop to their fullest potential. Parents and caring adults present or active in our schools, neighborhoods, and community-based organizations are important partners and *agents* who help young people develop their "assets" for adulthood — their skills, competencies, contributions and perspectives. This third of eight reports in the *Growing Up Well* series highlights the views of California adults about investing in young people for their healthy development. Californians care about their young people and support strongly several investment strategies. These include after-school programs, mentoring, educational support, and getting parents more involved in the schools their children attend.

Adults Worry About Lack of Parental Supervision

Seventy-eight percent of adults surveyed said they are either very worried or somewhat worried about a lack of parental support for young people. Parents expressed greater worry: 82 percent said they are either very worried or somewhat worried, and more than half are very worried (table 1, page 2). Low-income parents (those below 200 percent of the federal poverty level) and single parents are the most worried (2).

A *national* sample of young people age 12 to 17 who were surveyed in 1997 reveals that young people are also concerned. Forty-nine percent said they believe most children these days need more attention and guidance from adults (3).

Free Time — A Time for Opportunity or Risk

Young people today have a lot of free time. A national study by the Carnegie Institute determined that discretionary time of young people age nine to 14 — the time which is not spent in school, studying, for personal care, or eating — makes up 42 percent of their waking hours. Of this time, half is spent watching television, versus time spent on sports and outdoor activities (6.6 percent); hobbies, art and playing (8.7 percent), reading (1.3 percent), or church (2.5 percent) (4, page 29).

Free time offers young people the opportunity for constructive learning. This learning can help them develop confidence and an understanding of how they fit in the world; a sense of involvement, ownership and connection through participation in their community; and skills which help them make decisions which promote their health and assume the responsibilities and privileges of adulthood. Yet, many young people do not participate in school or community-based activities. One study of middle and high-school students in San Francisco found few young people surveyed used their free time to participate in school or community activities, and a majority had never attended a youth program (5, page 3).

In the absence of constructive alternatives, free time can also provide young people time for taking risks which jeopardize their health and undermine their potential. A recent analysis of FBI records found that the hours at the end of the school day

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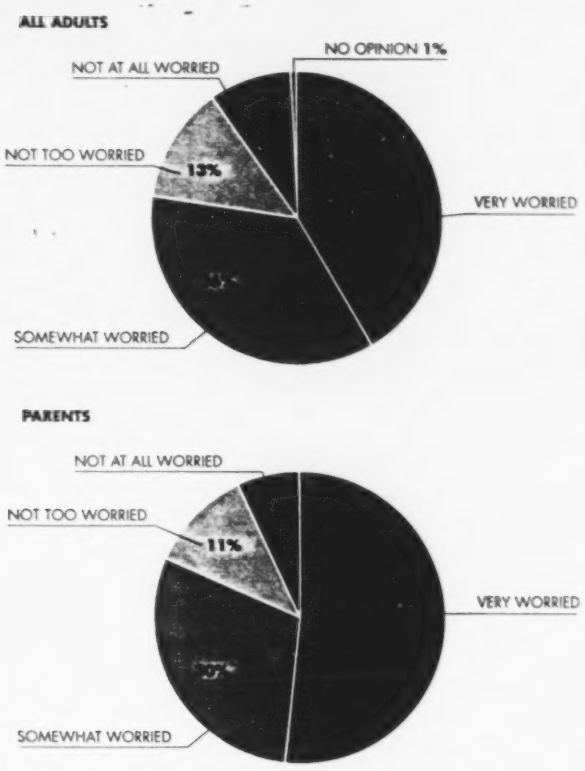
TABLE 1

Californians Concerned About Lack Of Parental Supervision and Guidance Of Children

How worried are you about this threat in regard to the children and youth who live in your community: a lack of parental support, including appropriate supervision and moral guidance?



Source: *Children and Youth Survey*, The Field Institute, October–November 1997.

when many young people are unsupervised — from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. — are the time when violent crime among youth is greatest (6, page 3). In addition, a third of young people age 12 to 17 reported in a national survey that they were without adult supervision after school. A quarter said they had engaged in risky behaviors such as smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol (3).

Many families include two working parents or a single parent who works outside the home. A safe, constructive alternative to unsupervised care is needed. CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* asked Californians if they would be willing to pay more taxes for after-school programs. Seventy-seven percent of registered voters said they are very or somewhat willing to pay for more of these programs (table 2, page 4).

Caring Adults Needed

Substantial evidence has been found that issues, such as substance abuse, delinquency, school failure, and teen pregnancy are associated with common factors, including: an early age of initiation of the behavior; low expectations for school achievement; low resistance to peer influence; lack of parental support; living in an economically-deprived neighborhood; truancy; and anti-social behaviors (4, page 28).

With research showing that a sense of connection between young people and adults helps protect young people from risks which can affect their health, it is clear that getting caring adults involved in young people's lives is essential to promoting their well-being. While society often implicitly expects parents to be the sole source of support for their children, adults in schools, neighborhoods, and community-based organizations are *agents* for their positive development as well.

Strategies to Promote Healthy Young People

Increasingly, the discussion about promoting healthy development of young people is focusing on how partnerships among parents, schools, neighborhoods and community-based organizations can assist young people develop the skills, self-confidence, and maturity they will need in adulthood. This discussion recognizes that *all* young people face challenges as they assume adult roles, and the focus of partnership efforts needs to be on promoting the *assets* of young people — their competencies, skills, contributions, and perspectives — to help them achieve and maintain good health, set personal goals, obtain satisfaction with themselves, and take active roles as members of their communities. This *assets-based* approach recognizes and reinforces the strengths young people have and need.

School and Community Partnerships

One partnering effort underway is San Francisco's Beacons Initiative, where the public schools, agencies serving youth and families, neighborhood residents, and community organizations have come together to create five school-based community centers. Seven more are planned. These centers offer young people a safe place to go after school, constructive activities, and provide an array of family support services.

Similarly, local Healthy Start programs are bringing together schools, local health and human service agencies, community organizations and businesses to focus on the needs of young people in their communities. Programs work in partnership with parents and family members to build family capacity and support for children. In addition, comprehensive school health programs (CSHPs) are combining — in an integrated and

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systemic matter — health education, health promotion and disease prevention, and access to health and social services at the school site.

Mentoring

One community-based approach bringing adults and young people together is mentoring. An evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program indicates mentoring can be very effective. Among other findings, this evaluation showed that program participants were 46 percent less likely to initiate drug use and 27 percent less likely to initiate alcohol use than those who did not participate. Certain program components were identified as key: stringent guidelines for volunteers by professional staff; formal orientation and training; and a structured matching process, with agency supervision to support each match (7, p. 101–103).

Young people at risk of substance abuse and juvenile delinquency are the focus of a mentoring program provided through the Tehama County Health Partnership, a community health coalition funded by The California Wellness Foundation's Health Improvement Initiative (see sidebar). The State of California has also put an emphasis on mentoring. Begun in 1995, a state mentoring initiative has obtained the involvement of over 62,000 mentors and 91,000 young people. Thousands of young people have put their names on a mentor waiting list, and additional funding is proposed in the 1998-99 state budget (8). CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* asked California adults if they would pay more in taxes for mentoring programs for children and youth. Eighty-two percent of registered voters surveyed said they are very or somewhat willing to pay more for these programs (table 2, page 4).

Educational Support

Research has shown the linkage between low educational attainment and a variety of conditions which undermine the health and well-being of children and adults. Recognizing this linkage, CCHI's *Children and Youth Survey* asked California adults if they would pay more in taxes for education support programs for young people, such as tutoring or reading programs. Eighty percent of registered voters surveyed said they are very or somewhat willing to pay more in taxes to support these programs (table 2, page 4).

CCHI also asked Californians whether establishing more programs to help school-age children who show early signs of school problems or juvenile delinquency and involving more parents in school activities would be effective approaches to make communities safer for children. Eighty-eight percent of California adults surveyed said establishing more programs for children having problems would be effective. Ninety-two percent said greater parental involvement would be effective (2).

Programs to help young people stay in school vary widely in design and focus. Yet evidence from a variety of federally funded drop-out prevention and intervention programs shows that strategies focused on educational support can result in improved grades, fewer student absences, more frequent contact between students and counselors, and a young person's improved feelings about school. Importantly, these evaluations also show caring adults are integral to a young person's motivation, achievement, and connection to school (7, p. 16-21).

Getting parents involved with their child's school can be a challenge, particularly when both parents work or when a single parent balances work and child-rearing. Innovative approaches are required, such as parent support groups and parent education programs. So is community support, particularly from employers, who need to adopt policies which encourage and facilitate employees who are parents to be involved with their children's school.

Policy Recommendations

Partner for Youth Development: Parents and caring adults in our schools, neighborhoods and community-based organizations can partner to assist young people develop the skills, self-confidence, and maturity they will need in adulthood. Policy-makers need to support policies and programs which encourage this partnering.

Providing Young People Support — A Community Priority

Michael is a bright 10 year old, but school is not the place he wants to be. Then again, neither is home. Right now, home is with his mom at her sister's apartment. He and his mom moved out after a fight between his parents that was the worst he's seen. And he's seen a lot; he can't remember when they didn't fight. Since his dad isn't helping out, his mom is a single parent trying to make ends meet on a low-wage job. Lately, Michael's been cutting class and hanging out with some older kids. His grades, never terrific, have been dropping.

Michael and other youth like him, age 8 to 12, are the focus of *Whatever It Takes*, a program of the Tehama County Health Partnership, funded by a grant from The California Wellness Foundation's Health Improvement Initiative. Contracting with a community-based organization, the Partnership, made up of county health and human service departments, local schools, law enforcement, and community organizations, is providing mentoring and case management for youth at high risk for substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. Working with parents, the Partnership is getting young people involved in school and after-school activities, helping them meet educational goals by addressing learning barriers, and promoting their self-esteem.

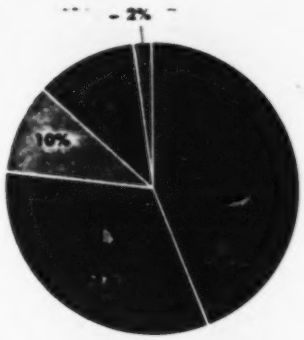
For more information call 530 527 6824.

TABLE 2

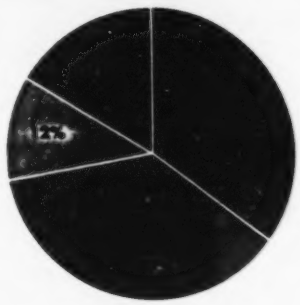
Three in Four Voters Willing to Pay More Taxes for Programs for Young People

Generally speaking are you very willing, somewhat willing, not too willing or not at all willing to pay more in taxes to make these programs more available for the children and families in your community?

AFTER SCHOOL CARE AND RECREATION PROGRAMS



MENTORING PROGRAMS PROVIDING ADULT INTERACTIONS AND ROLE MODELS



EDUCATION SUPPORT PROGRAMS SUCH AS TUTORING AND READING

VERY WILLING | SOMEWHAT WILLING | NOT TOO WILLING | NOT AT ALL WILLING | NO OPINION

Source: *Children and Youth Survey*, The Field Institute, October–November 1997.

Focus on Assets: All young people face challenges as they assume adult roles and responsibilities. Policy-makers need to support programs and policies which promote development of the *assets* of young people — their competencies, skills, contributions, and perspectives — to help them achieve and maintain good health, set personal goals, obtain satisfaction with themselves, and take active roles as members of their communities.

Invest in Young People: Californians care about young people and are willing to invest additional resources in a variety of approaches to promote their healthy development. Policy-makers need to heed this clear signal for further investment.

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